

# Fighting Spam: Moving Email to the Cloud

By Andrew Schrader



**O**n average, more than 90% of email is unwanted junk mail—spam. Many spam messages include annoying promotions for irrelevant products, but others include viruses and pornographic content, which can pose a severe legal issue for schools.

Spam puts districts in a difficult situation as schools try to enhance learning in the classroom with advanced technology. As a result,

*Districts can fight email spam  
by not letting it into the system at all.*

many school districts engage in a daily combat with viruses and other potentially destructive threats that enter the school via email in-boxes.

How can a school district overcome these potentially dangerous challenges? How can administrators, teachers, and students protect them-

selves from the threats that frequently accompany spam messages? And how can schools accomplish this feat in an effective and time-efficient manner?

The Morris School District in Morristown, New Jersey, found a way to do just that.

Morris School District Director of Technology Tim McDade is responsible for protecting more than 750 users from dangerous and unwanted email spam and viruses. These users are not only teachers and administrators using laptops and other portable devices provided by the school system, but also students using common area computers in libraries and classrooms.

McDade faced an especially difficult challenge dealing with spam. The sheer volume of junk email caused significant network downtime. With the already limited email bandwidth overwhelmed by junk messages, Internet and email access slowed to a grind. McDade was the target of complaints by frustrated school computer users—particularly those who need access to email, which they rely on for important communications with other teachers, staff members, and students.

## Managing email security internally is a major pain point for schools.

Spam and the threats that surround it were a constant worry. McDade recalls: “Not only was bandwidth an issue, but I constantly worried about the security of computer users. Heaven forbid a teacher opened a virus-laden email. It could bring down the entire network for days.”

Becoming bogged down with a semifunctioning email system put a heavy strain on McDade’s small information technology staff. Their days consistently included responding to help desk requests from frustrated teachers and administrators. To further complicate matters, budget cuts forced the already lean IT staff to reduce by one more: the email administrator.

### Looking to the Cloud

McDade recognized the problem and knew there must be a better and more affordable solution. He researched some potential solutions and found exactly what he was looking for: taking email management outside the school district’s network and putting it in the cloud.

Managing email security internally is a major pain point for schools. By moving email management to the cloud—moving it to an off-site host—McDade realized

he could remove the burden placed on the school district’s network. The hosted email model trades cost and complexity for a secure, reliable, and professionally engineered email protection service.

“Our spam was cut down to virtually nothing and the problem was solved literally overnight,” recounts McDade. “It’s the best technical decision I’ve ever made and I’ve been doing this job for 11 years.”

Before moving to a hosted email model, the district relied on Microsoft Exchange to block spam. The Microsoft Exchange server blocks and isolates spam messages, but the internal network still receives them, causing a number of bandwidth issues and preventing users from a quick and secure Internet connection.

With the hosted email model, spam emails are blocked before they enter the district’s network, reducing the bandwidth requirement and increasing the security of the network.

At the end of the 2009–2010 school year, a spam campaign targeted users on the Morris School District network. In the past, McDade would have spent days, if not weeks, trying to develop a patch to prevent these messages from entering the in-boxes of those within the network. With the hosted email model, only three employees reported receiving the spam; the other messages were identified as spam and stopped in the cloud, long before the messages could approach the network.

### Full-Time Protection

A hosted email solution also saves time when a wanted email is stuck in the spam filter. In the past, it could take hours to fish around for a trapped email. Once it was found, McDade had to confirm the sender’s identity, where it came from, and the intended recipient before releasing it. With a hosted email model, releasing a caught-in-the-spam-filter email takes just seconds.

“Every email issue that arises gets dealt with in a timely manner,” says McDade. “The hosted email model is one I’d definitely recommend for school districts. Email is a year-round process, so you need to protect the network and your users 365 days a year, 24 hours a day.” That is something the district could not promise in the past. Today it can.

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**Andrew Schrader** is national sales director for AppRiver, based in Gulf Breeze, Florida.

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